

Kelly on the Normativity of Perceptual Experience

John O’dea
the University of Tokyo

In Philosophy of Mind, *Representationalism* is the view that what makes a perceptual experience the kind of experience it is, is largely or entirely a matter of its having the representational contents it does. It is a popular view, but not without problems. One such problem is the phenomenon of *perceptual constancy*. Constancy is defined as the tendency for things to look (or sound) the same despite changes in our experience of them through changes in distance, orientation, and so on. Although how an object looks can change depending on these factors, none of these changes generally cause us to see the object itself as changing. From a representational point of view, we would like to explain the way things look in terms of the way they look *to be*; the features they look to have. Perceptual constancy is a classic problem for representationalism because, by definition, the way things look *to be* is constant in these cases despite the fact that they look different. Even worse, attempts to describe the different appearances in representational terms introduces an apparent contradiction. For instance, a car in the distance looks smaller, in some sense, than an identical car nearby, but since in fact one can see that the two cars are the same size, it is difficult to see how a size difference can enter into the experience. The cars look, and yet do not look, different sizes.

In order to stay within the representationalist project, it is necessary to deny that the apparent size difference is really an apparent size difference. We will have to argue that the apparent size difference is actually an apparent difference of another kind, and that this alternative is a plausible difference in the way we see things to be. This is not an easy argument to make, but Sean Kelly has recently attempted it. Kelly’s argument is the subject of this talk.

Kelly’s proposal is that although the objects look the same size, the ways those sizes look is different, such that the apparent distance is *part of* the appearance of size. Kelly here borrows an idea of Merleau-Ponty, that distance is not merely an apparent relational feature of objects, but rather a source of tension:

The distance from me to the object is not a size which increases or decreases, but a tension which fluctuates around a norm. (*Phenomenology of Perception*, p302)

Kelly’s proposal has two parts. Firstly, that the experiences of objects is normative in the sense that Merleau-Ponty advocates. Secondly, that this

normativity accounts for the apparent fact that objects in the distance seem smaller than objects that are nearby. I will argue that the first may be plausible, but not the second part.